



# RUTGERS

Center for Middle Eastern Studies

August 1, 2022

Dr. Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi  
Director, Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Institute of Iranian Studies  
University of Toronto, Faculty of Arts and Sciences

Dear Professor Tavakoli-Targhi and Members of the Committee:

I write to apply for the Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Post-Doctoral Fellowship in Iranian Studies. Currently, I am the Associate Director of the Middle Eastern Studies Program and Post-Doctoral Associate at Rutgers University-New Brunswick. I received my doctoral degree from Columbia University after successfully defending my dissertation, *Contending Visions of Iran: The Battle for the Sacred Nation State, 1941-1983*. Intersecting at comparative literature, social history, and religious studies, my research focuses on how economic development theory and utopic concepts of the nation-state shaped Iran and its diverse religious communities during the twentieth century. I am excited at the prospect of joining the University of Toronto to complete editing two book projects.

In *Contending Visions*, forthcoming by Stanford University Press, I show how a fissiparous population *across* the religious *and* political spectra used the rhetoric and rites of sacrifice to advance competing visions of the state that each group sought to produce. In doing so, my critical perspective challenges the narrative that only religious revivalists or the Islamic right used sacrificial images and language in political movements aiming to achieve a “better Iran” or an “ideal” nation-state. By analyzing ostensibly secular actors through the lens of political theology, I show how they believed in the sacredness of Iran, thought and acted religiously, and influenced society through poetry, writings, and speeches related to development and governance projects. Groups across society—at elite and non-elite levels, both for and against the monarchy—engaged in or were affected by the discursive processes through which Iran changed from being just a country to being the sacred necessitating sacrifice. Across decades, multiple generations of Iranians read, heard, and saw words and actions about the sacredness of Iran and the fight for its future. Marxists, Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians (among other communities) participated in this internecine battle over the future, “ideal” state. When Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, these diverse communities defended their sacred, albeit for varying reasons and in different ways. Ultimately, I demonstrate how Iran is—surprisingly to many—like other countries the world over in that the most popular religion is the religion of the nation-state.

My second project, *The Jewish Exemption Claim: Histories and Narratives of Jewish Iranians during the Iran-Iraq War*, builds on the inclusive scholarship in *Contending Visions*. I completed the research and began writing chapters for this project during a period of archival inaccessibility and COVID-19, when the planned revisions to my first book project stalled. Springing from my first book’s concluding chapters about diverse communal participation during the War, here, I unsettle the assertion that Jewish Iranians received a battle front exemption from 1980 to 1986. The first to examine the claim, I help unsettle the discursive power of archives to produce a silence on and invisibility of minority communities during the War. To do so in the case of Jewish Iranians, I examine empirical data, analyze

digital archives, and mobilize primary source documents from the early 1980s to question the idea of a general central government exception. Pivotaly, I produce oral histories from Jews who were at the war fronts as well as Sacred Defense cultural producers and their associates to explain how the idea of the Exemption may have arisen and to deny the possibility of a general exemption. By using the words of war veterans, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, this work helps undo exclusionist representations of how Iranian and Jewish pasts are archived, accessed, and narrated.

Because of the interdisciplinary nature of my research in Iranian Studies, I will continue to publish in a wide array of domains. Forthcoming this year from *History and Anthropology* is my first publication on the Jewish Exemption Claim, entitled “Overlooked but Not Forgotten: The Jewish Exemption Claim and the Society of Tehran Jews.” Published last year in *Losing Our Minds, Coming to Our Senses* was “Seeing Red, Hearing the Revolution.” In it, I analyze the 1950s newspaper *Shuresh* not as an illegal, radical outlet. Instead, I show how it was a multi-sensory mechanism used to appeal to several religious communities of varying levels of religiosity and literacies to riot and support the Mosaddeq government. In addition, three articles are in progress. Two articles examine the historical transformation of the words and concepts related to *fedā’*. These articles are a necessary philological and theological response to those who translate the word *fedā’ī* as “literally self-sacrificer” to imply Iranian violence as directly, textually, espoused in the Qur’an, which is not the case. As part of my work with the National Endowment for the Humanities project “Reimagining Jewish Life in the Modern Middle East,” my co-authors and I are working to complete a chapter on historiography and memory.

I have a consistent track record of publishing original, incisive research in Iranian Studies since my doctoral defense. I am on track to publish three major articles covering three different topics of Iranian Studies in four years. Unfortunately, my work has been negatively impacted by inaccessibility to archives and COVID-19. This has significantly delayed the revisions to *Contending Visions*, which is more than 70 percent done. Despite the setbacks, I continue to move forward with my research plan, and I have begun writing *The Jewish Exemption Claim*. An Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Post-Doctoral Fellowship will provide me the time and institutional support to finish both book manuscripts.

Please find attached my CV and research statement. I am happy to provide additional materials.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



Neda Bolourchi  
Associate Director, Middle Eastern Studies Program  
Post-Doctoral Associate  
[neda.bolourchi@rutgers.edu](mailto:neda.bolourchi@rutgers.edu)